

The Canal du Midi – the sensation of Southern France

John Frew and Marcia Vallance

The allure of France has always been the gastronomical delights, plentiful wine and wonderful weather. This can only be improved by enjoying the sights of Southern France by boat on the Canal du Midi. There is nothing more relaxing than gently moving along at a slow 10 knots as you watch the towns, bridges, locks and wineries pass you by.



Sunset at Bezier Port

Experiencing the Canal is fascinating and it matters little in which direction you travel through this Languedoc region of France. The canal links Toulouse with the Mediterranean, which means you can explore the history of the Cathar castles along the way. Carcassonne is a 'must do' tour with a stay of at least two nights at that port. This is where it can be very handy to hire push bikes with your boat to explore the towns a little way off the canal with ease. One of these special towns is Bram, a distance of 2 kms from the canal port but well worth the visit – especially if you have researched the Cathar history of the area.



The castle at Carcassonne

One of the greatest pleasures of riding the canals is managing the locks. As it happens in France they have lock keepers who make the job much easier. It soon becomes apparent that planning is needed for lunch on board each day as the lock keepers stop strictly at 12.30pm every day. This leaves you stranded in the delightful countryside to enjoy a lunch of lovely French bread, cheese, sausage and of course rosé as you wait your turn to start up again. The region has impressive markets in towns along the way, where it's easy to shop with the locals and 'be prepared'.

There are many restaurants and cafes worth visiting and you can be easily tempted to try the regional specialties such as the famous cassoulet at Castelnaudary, but it's just as nice to cook dinner on board with excellent barbecue facilities on the upper deck. This means you can take in the sunset and enjoy the local fare once again.

The great advantage of this type of travel is your accommodation being no problem at all – your boat becomes your home and as you move silently along the water, it becomes apparent how relaxing it is without traffic and cars. There's nothing but other friendly boaters to exchange stories with at the locks. You can even practice your French!



The Aiguille lock (L'écluse de l'Aiguille)

This delightful tour does need some planning to avoid missing some of the special attractions on the way. Once you've decided on the number of days of boat hire (we suggest a minimum of ten days), work out a rough itinerary allowing for some unexpected stops that are too good to resist as you absorb the French culture. Be aware of the locks that might be just before the port where you hand in your boat and try to get to your destination the night before as the locks don't open before 9.00am and most boats need to be handed in by then. The Fonseranes locks outside of Beziers are a series of eight staircase locks and take some time to travel through. Prepare for good weather, possibly a little cool at night and occasional showers of rain in September/October. Good shoes are needed for boating and managing the locks, with a pair of boating gloves the absolute 'must have' on this trip.

So, if you're interested in history, good food and wine, relaxing in the French countryside and visiting unusual medieval towns, then this trip is for you.



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Useful references: There's plenty on You Tube, and Rick Stein's series on the canal is inspiring.

Contributor details



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John was Principal of Holsworthy High from 2000-2016 and before that, Campbell House School. He is interested in behaviour management of children with extreme behaviours and loves to travel!

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